

US Military Commander Warns Against Early Pullout from Iraq

By Michael Bowman
Washington
04 March 2008

The top U.S. military commander in the Middle East says he is encouraged by Iraq's improved [security](#) situation, but favors a wait-and-see approach when it comes to making further commitments to withdraw U.S. troops from the country. From Washington, VOA's Michael Bowman reports.

Admiral William Fallon says last year's troop surge in Iraq has succeeded in reducing terrorist attacks and sectarian violence in the country. Speaking before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the admiral said the gains will allow the United States to consider further troop reductions in Iraq, but cautioned against an accelerated pullout.

"Today there is increased confidence that the situation in Iraq is improving," he said. "Our desire is to continue to bring our force levels down in Iraq as the Iraqis demonstrate their abilities to stand up and take responsibility for security in the country. Those trends are certainly encouraging and moving in the right direction. But it is critical that we not lose the ground that has been so hard fought."

From the start, President Bush said the troop surge would be temporary. The Pentagon has planned a limited withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq that is scheduled to be completed in July. After that, Admiral Fallon said he and other commanders believe the United States should take time to reassess conditions in Iraq before contemplating further troop cuts.

Senators welcomed news that violence and bloodshed has subsided in Iraq, but some expressed disappointment with Iraqi leaders. Senator Carl Levin, the committee's chairman, said Iraq's leaders have failed to take full advantage of heightened security to promote national reconciliation.

"Iraqi leaders continue to squander the opportunity our troops and our taxpayers have given them," he said. "Our soldiers risk their lives while Iraqi politicians refuse to take political risks. We cannot have the lives of American service members held hostage to Iraqi political dicker [bickering and delay]."

Admiral Fallon admitted that the pace of political reform in Iraq has been slow, but stressed that Iraq's nascent democracy is not a failure.

"It has been encouraging to watch the development of these people, from Prime Minister Maliki on down," he said. "To see them take responsibility. And increasingly we are seeing the results of that. It is not a straight line [to political progress] and I do not think it is going to be. And there are things that are frustrating. This is a different culture than ours. But it is coming along."

On other matters, the admiral acknowledged that Afghanistan has seen a sharp rise in poppy cultivation. Poppies are used to make the narcotic heroine. Admiral Fallon said President Hamid Karzai's [government](#) must do more to crack down on the drug trade, but added that the overall situation in Afghanistan is far from bleak. He said Mr. Karzai continues to enjoy broad popular support, and that U.S.-Afghan military cooperation is strong.

On Iran, the admiral noted that President Mahmoud Amadinejad is attempting to boost Iran's influence throughout the Middle East. But he said that Iran's neighbors are not blind to Mr. Ahmadinejad's ambitions, and Iran's stature in the region, in his words, "has not grown."